

# GIRL GROUPS TO ADDRESS SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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# GIRL GROUPS TO ADDRESS SEXUAL VIOLENCE



## BRIEFING PAPER

### THIS BRIEFING...

In this briefing paper, we discuss the importance of Girl Groups and their key elements to address sexual violence.

We also highlight a number context- and needs-based activities and topics discussed in the Girl Groups associated with Networks 4 Change in Canada and South Africa.

We hope to inspire others to start Girl Groups with goals of improving the lives of all young people, particularly girls and young women.

### INTRODUCTION

Girl Groups have been around for a long time. From the formal structures of Girl Guides and the Girl Scouting movement established early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the more informal structures of friendship groups and clubs, the idea of girls and young women coming together in safe spaces to talk about issues related to gender and to related issues of leadership has been a key component of the history of girls and young women. Girl Groups are generally extra-curricular clubs in a school or a community where adolescent girls can come together to think about, learn about, and talk about issues related to gender. They may be referred to as Girls' Clubs (and sometimes Gender Clubs).

Typically, Girl Groups are girl-centred and girl-led, meaning the participants get to pick the name of the group and decide what topics, themes or issues they want to address in the group. While still being referred to as Girl Groups, many groups have evolved over time to include individuals of all gender identities including trans-folk, 2 spirited, gender fluid and boys. Girl Groups are part of a movement empowering youth to become leaders and champions against gender injustices. Each Girl Group operates slightly differently but a successful group will respond to the needs and interests of the participants and support them as they become agents of change in their communities.



*Girl Groups is one of the best things that happened to me. I feel so much stronger as a woman. I can be myself and I can share my struggle without being judged.*

Andraya Daniels, Young Indigenous Women's Utopia

(L) Young Girls Leading Change leading a march they organized to raise awareness of gender-based violence in the town of Paterson, South Africa.

(R) A scene from Young Indigenous Women's Utopia's cellphilm. It addressed discrimination against and stereotypes of Indigenous women.



## WHY GIRL GROUPS?

Often, programs that have been developed for youth defer to the needs and interests of boys, as boys and men are often positioned as the representatives or norms for an entire population/ age group. Girl Groups, however, are programs created to account for the specific needs and interests of the individuals participating. The participants of Girl Groups have interests, needs and face challenges that are unique to their different positions and experiences.



*Being a part of the Young Indigenous Women's Utopia girls group means so much to me and has taught me so many things, like what GBV is, how it feels to be a part of something and how to speak up for what I believe in.*

Ocean Sanders, Young Indigenous Women's Utopia

Girl Groups address important issues and topics, including sexual violence, which are not always discussed openly and that participants may not be comfortable discussing with boys. Girl Groups recognize that the participants of the groups are the experts of their own lives.

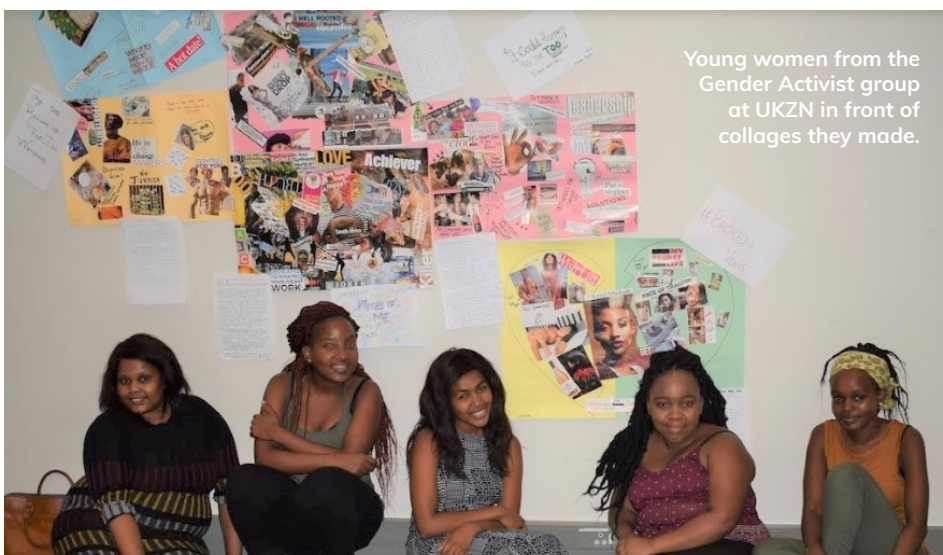
By co-constructing and producing knowledge on the lived experiences of the participants, Girl Groups can be vehicles for meaningful change. Girl Groups empower individuals to take action, resulting in changes in their communities, if not the world, that better the lives of young people.



Members of Leaders 4 Young Women's Success participate in an activity on self-love as resistance at the Girls' Leadership Forum in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The forum brought together three groups associated with Networks4Change and was facilitated by Kari Wuttunee, who travelled all the way from Canada.

## SAFE SPACES

The term 'safe space' describes a place where participants of the group will feel safe, and comfortable without fear of being made to feel unwelcome on account of physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, cultural identity, race/ ethnicity or gender expression and identity.<sup>1</sup> Safe spaces are necessary to create Girl Groups where the participants feel comfortable developing their voices, expressing themselves, exploring their identity, building friendships, discussing sensitive/ taboo topics and learning from one another.



Young women from the Gender Activist group at UKZN in front of collages they made.

The process of creating a safe space may vary depending on the activity, some essential aspects of creating safe spaces include preparation, comfortable environments, emotional support, ethical considerations and consent.<sup>2</sup>



*To me, Girl Groups is a safe place with people I care about, and people that care about me.*

Jessica McNab, Young Indigenous Women's Utopia



## GIRL ONLY SPACES TO MIXED GROUPS

Some research on Girl Groups suggests that spaces without boys can be effective in creating safe spaces for the participants. Spaces without men or boys have been found to reduce the power imbalances which often silence others in co-ed spaces, allowing the participants of Girl Groups to find their voices and be empowered to express themselves.<sup>3</sup> In spaces without boys, the participants are more comfortable discussing and sharing their experiences, creating a sense of community and an environment that fosters support and friendships.

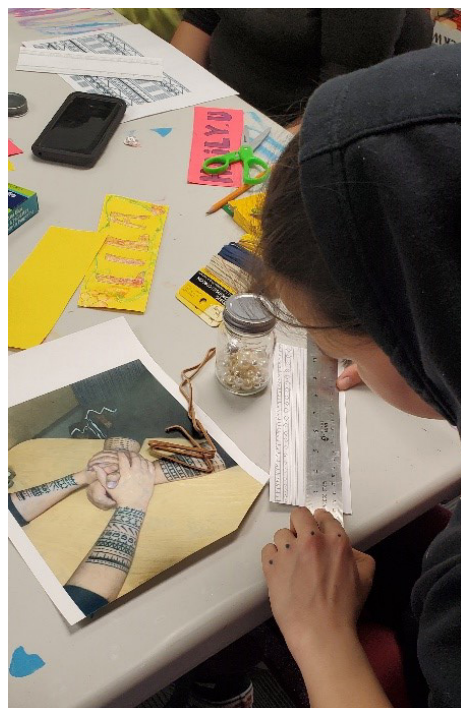
As Girl Groups progress, some participants have expressed a desire to open the group to include boys. It is important to honour the interests of the participants and create a

space that is safe, empowering and fosters positive relationships for all members of the group. These groups can take a number of different forms including separate Boys Groups which work in synch with Girl Groups and collaborate occasionally or fully co-ed groups. The creation of groups that engage all youth has shown promise in starting conversations and engaging boys with the topics of gender issues and social justice and activism.<sup>4</sup>



*I have learnt that we as girls need to support each other and give love to one other all the time.*

Siyamthanda Nogaya,  
Young Girls Leading Change



A girl from Rankin Inlet participates in an activity where groups are asked to draw symbols of their identity.

## CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

Central to Girl Groups is the recognition of diversity among participants. The lives of the participants and the challenges they face will be specific to their culture, where they live, their age, and other social circumstances. It is essential that Girl Groups account for the unique cultural and social identities of the participants. While Girl Groups engage with global systems of oppression, taking into account specific regional, community and cultural contexts is essential in creating a Girl Group with the ability to positively impact the lives of the participants. Working with each community on an individual basis can be a way for Girl Groups to attend to place specific experiences of the participants and provide specialized resources and interventions as needed.



Girls from Leaders for Young Women's Success get creative while making drawings as part of a photovoice activity on policy making to address sexual violence in Canada and South Africa. Photo exhibitions can be easily displayed in the community.

Some Girl Groups have found success when engaging the community as a key stakeholder in the group.<sup>5, 6</sup> This has helped Girl Groups create strong partnerships with the community and address issues brought up in the group at a community level. The importance of considering culture and community is seen clearly with Girl Groups for Indigenous girls in a variety of contexts, including Girl Groups in South Africa with strong educational agendas and Girl Groups in Canada with a focus on decolonization and cultural revitalization.



*When I am with my cousins, we always have a girl's chat, where we discuss everything we are experiencing. I am the person that is always advising other cousins on what to do, that is the skill I gained from this group.*

Xabisa Bless, Young  
Girls Leading Change

Girl Group's countries recognize the complex nature of intersecting and interlocking global and local factors that impact the participants' well-being and livelihoods. Successful Girl Groups will take into account the unique cultural and community contexts of the participants. Generally, Girl Groups in lower- and middle-income countries are part of large projects or interventions with multiple components, that aim to address a number of the factors and challenges impacting the well-being of the participants collectively. These groups critically engage the participants with outside forces that impact their livelihoods,<sup>7</sup> while encouraging and supporting activism at local levels.

In several country contexts such as Canada and South Africa, Girl Groups specifically for Indigenous youth have a foundational awareness that the lived experiences of the participants are shaped by their intersecting cultural and gender identities. These Girl Groups positively promote cultural identity and create a space for the participants to explore gendered issues, empowering them in their cultural and gender identities. A common goal of Indigenous Girl Groups is to facilitate the building of strong friendships and relationships with women and elders in the communities.<sup>4,5</sup> It is crucial these groups are community-specific, recognizing the diversity between Indigenous Nations and attending to the diverse needs of the participants.



A poster by the Eskasoni group on resisting sexual violence and being resilient. Posters are a way to spread and share information.



The Sisters Rising Indigenous circle on the first day of the *Engaging Youth and Community Response to Sexualized Violence Forum*, in Victoria, Canada. Events that engage the community are important for Girl Groups to share their work.



Girls from Young Indigenous Women's Utopia, wearing the ribbon skirts they made. Ribbon skirts are worn by Indigenous women at ceremonies and honour women and teachings.



Participants from Girls Leading Change group in t-shirts from the *Circles Within Circles* Conference.



*We're learning to cope with daily difficulties that we are facing. We came across information that would never have been highlighted to us ... Being in this group is giving me a push to start planning for my career future, which is something no one has told me about.*

Girls Leading Change Participant

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM INDIGENOUS GROUPS IN CANADA ATTACHED TO NETWORKS4CHANGE

Adapted from *Networks4Change* gathering, December, 2018

- 1 Sustained and not organized around 'once off' activities
- 2 Youth-led, especially in relation to how local youth want to be involved and as such it is context and community grounded (and approaches will vary across sites)
- 3 Anti-oppressive and strength-based
- 4 Incorporates local Indigenous perspectives
- 5 Organised around gentle, consent-based conversations
- 6 Arts-based with some art being more public than others (cellphilm productions and screenings vs. body mapping)
- 7 Recognizes that sexual and gender-based violence is not a stand-alone issue and that entry points for working with girls need to start with their concerns and where they are
- 8 Recognizes and locates youth and community-focused ethical considerations attached to art-making within the idea of cultural safety



## HOW TO START A GIRL GROUP

Every Girl Group will run a little differently in order to work the best for the individuals involved. It is most important to find a structure that works best for your group.

These are some basic steps to get a Girl Group started:



Identify a potential facilitator to bring the idea of a Girl Group to the school or community.



Find an accessible space to host the group.



Identify potential members and invite them to an initial meeting.



In the first meeting, pick a name for your group. Determine:

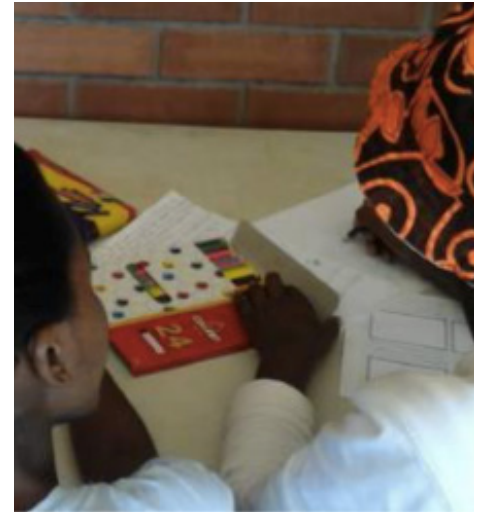
- What topics you want to discuss
- How often your group wants to meet
- Some activities the group might be interested in doing
- What the goals of your group are

## TOPICS

The topics addressed will be chosen by the participants, including:

GENDER EQUALITY	GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE	GENDER ROLES & GENDER NORMS	CULTURAL IDENTITY & GENDER IDENTITY
CAREER PLANNING	BODY CONFIDENCE	SELF-ESTEEM	RELATIONSHIPS: FAMILY, FRIENDS, ROMANTIC, SELF
SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH	ACTIVISM	SOCIAL JUSTICE	OTHER TOPICS SUGGESTED BY MEMBERS

(R) Girls from Leaders 4 Young Women's Success create storyboards for their cellphilms. The theme of their films was resistance and speaking back.



## ACTIVITIES

In practice, Girl Groups can run a number of different activities to start dialogues on gendered issues. Many groups draw on participatory visual methods where girl and young women express their views and be producers of knowledge. Some of these activities may include:

- Inviting role models from the community as guest speakers
- Screening films or YouTube clips for discussion
- Designing and making group t-shirts
- Workshops to document thoughts, feelings and experiences
- Organizing awareness marches
- Organizing community meetings to showcase the work of the group
- Workshops on healthy relationships and lifestyles
- Organizing for activism and social action



A girl from Rankin Inlet showcases her work in an activity where groups are asked to create a message in a jar symbolizing their Inuit identity.



*I like Girl Groups because they make me feel like I belong and I like how we do everything together like travel, eat, laugh and learn new stuff, I actually like everything about the group. It's an amazing group to be in.*

Kalan Kakum-McKay, Young Indigenous Women's Utopia



Social III Fighters wearing t-shirts their group designed while participating in a leadership workshop. Different groups have made different t-shirts to express their identities.

## OUTCOMES & BENEFITS

Girl Groups respond to the needs and interests of the participants. With this in mind, the specific purpose and aims of Girl Groups may differ between and among groups. Some of the outcomes and positive effects of Girl Groups include participants:

- Feeling **empowered**.
- Gaining **confidence**.
- Finding their **voices** and gaining confidence in using them.
- Increasing their **listening** and **learning** skills.
- Gaining knowledge about **sexual violence**.
- Gaining knowledge about healthy **relationships** and healthy lifestyle **choices**.
- Gaining knowledge about **gender-based** violence and **sexual** violence.
- Becoming more equipped to face **challenges**.
- Gaining **independence**.
- Building strong **friendships** and support **networks**.
- Being supported in their **activism** and social **action**.
- Becoming a generation of **resilient** youth.

*Girls Group has had a huge impact on my life. It empowers me by reminding me to love myself and that I am strong along with every other woman in our group.*

Cindy Moccasin, Young Indigenous Women's Utopia

*The group taught me to be independent and proud of myself. I learnt to stand up for myself and be able to be strong for what I believe is right.*

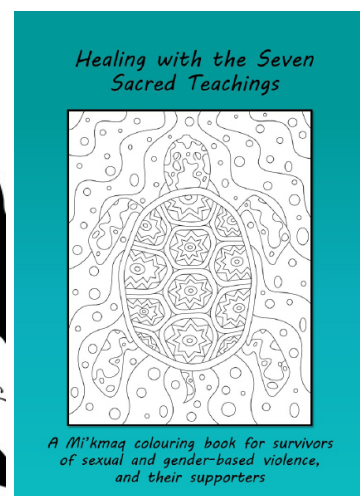
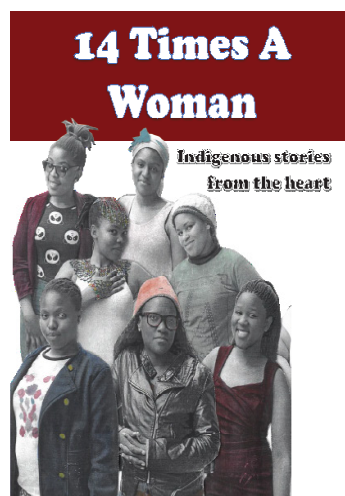
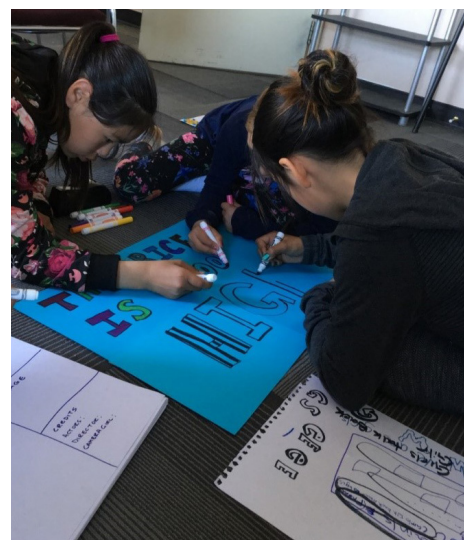
Girls Leading Change Participants

## ACTIVISM & GIRL GROUPS

Activism and social change are guiding principles for many Girl Groups. With activism as a guiding principle, these Girl Groups strive to mobilize knowledge and work with the participants to create positive change. Change-oriented and action-driven Girl Groups support the initiatives and social justice pursuits of the participants as they strive to create change in their own lives, social circles, communities, governments and worlds. Girl Groups guided by activism and social change are part of larger global movements addressing gender injustices and striving to positively shape the lives of young people.

(Bottom Row) Girl Groups and youth groups may publish books or zines. These books were all created by *Networks4Change* Girl Groups.

(R) Girls in Rankin Inlet create posters for their music video "The Price is too High". The group brainstormed issues important to Inuit girls in their community and decided to create a video on food insecurity.



## EXAMPLES OF GIRL/YOUTH GROUPS IN NETWORKS4CHANGE

The groups attached to *Networks for Change and Well-being: Girl-led 'from the ground up' policymaking to address sexual violence in Canada and South Africa* include groups of girls and young women in several provinces in South Africa (Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) and Canada (Nunavut, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia). While most are in school or community settings, some are located in university contexts.



### **Eskasoni Youth** (Eskasoni, Canada)

Young women and young men from Eskasoni—the largest Aboriginal community in Atlantic Canada—have been participating in and conducting fieldwork as part of *Networks4Change* since 2016 and have used various activities to unpack what sexual and gender-based violence means, and what it looks like in Eskasoni.



### **Gender Activists** (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa)

The Gender Activists are a student-led group of students (and staff) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Education in South Africa. Established in 2017, the group aims to understand gender-based violence (GBV) on campus and to address it.



### **Girls Leading Change** (South Africa)

In 2013 the *Networks4Change* project was piloted in the Faculty of Education at the Nelson Mandela University, bringing together 14 young first-year education students from rural areas to explore sexual violence. They further explored their feeling safe at university—an issue of concern to universities in South Africa, but also to universities worldwide. Their engagement in the project has enabled them to take up their agency in speaking out against injustices in various spaces.



### **Indigenous Young Women's Utopia** (Saskatchewan, Canada)

The Saskatoon/Treaty 6/Traditional Homeland of the Metis site has continued to work with 8 young Indigenous women to explore and navigate the colonial and gendered violent context that we survive and exist in. Empowered by each other and our Nehiwayan and Michif ways, these young women continue to explore self-love as our first form of resistance.



### **Leaders for Young Women's Success** (Khethani, South Africa)

Leaders for Young Women's Success are a group of girls and young women from Khethani, a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. They create artwork from cellphilms and digital stories and tell a story of what gender-based violence (GBV) looks like in their community.



### **Rankin Inlet Girl Group** (Rankin Inlet, Canada)

This group is engaged with participatory visual methods, producing a music video to reclaim the representation of Indigenous women in media and producing a cellphilms on the topic of food security, drawing attention to the links between food security and sexual and gender-based violence.



### **Sisters Rising** (Victoria, Canada)

Sisters Rising is an Indigenous-led research project based in British Columbia. It works with communities and organizations to conduct art- and land-based workshops with Indigenous girls, young women, and youth of all genders, including 2spirit and LGBTTQQ youth, using a trans-generational framework.



### **Social Ills Fighters** (Loskop, South Africa)

Social Ills Fighters are a group of girls and young women from a rural area in South Africa that creates artwork in response to what gender-based violence (GBV) looks like in the SIFs' community. They show how cultural practices, including forced and early marriage, and traditional gender norms can be and are experienced by girls and young women as violence.



### **Young Girls Leading Change** (Eastern Cape, South Africa)

Young Girls Leading Change is a group of 7 girls who address gender-based violence in their rural school and community. They have been using participatory visual methodologies to explore what gender-based violence looks like in their community and what to do about it.



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